

VZCZCXRO3764
PP RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #0644/01 0951503
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 041503Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5818
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 1188
RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU PRIORITY
RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5// PRIORITY
RHMFISS/39ABG CP INCIRLIK AB TU PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/425ABG IZMIR TU//CC// PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000644

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/03/2023
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: A LOST CHANCE

REF: ANKARA 622 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: PolCouns Janice G Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary. Murat Mercan, the chair of parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and a long-time contact, is pessimistic about Turkey's future in light of the closure case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). He echoed AKP Vice Chair Saban Disli's description (reftel) of AKP's approach: the party will prepare its defense, move forward with its agenda, and will not push a constitutional reform package absent consensus with other parties. Mercan has been through party closures before; he sees this one as different: It's about leadership. A charismatic leader doesn't come along every day. Tayyip Erdogan is one, per Mercan; once he is banned from politics -- and Mercan is convinced that eight or nine months from now, the Constitutional Court will close AKP and ban Erdogan and others from politics for five years -- Turkey, both domestically and in the region, will have lost a big chance. End summary.

12. (C) Mercan told us April 4 that, though it won't be official until April 7, after Sunday evening's AKP governing board meeting, the decision has been made on how to proceed in light of the closure case. Reiterating what AKP Vice Chair Saban Disli told us earlier, Mercan said the party will pursue a vigorous defense. It will proceed with a solid parliamentary agenda, with a focus on EU reforms. And it will not put forward a package of constitutional and political party law reforms designed to change the party closure process unless it obtains consensus with the opposition. Despite the best intentions, Mercan predicted, Article 301 (insulting "Turkishness") will be virtually impossible to amend -- it will simply be too hard politically. (Opposition Nationalist Action Party -- MHP -- has announced publicly it will not allow "one word" of 301 to be changed.)

13. (C) Since Mercan firmly believes that the Constitutional Court will eventually close AKP and ban Tayyip Erdogan, together with other key AKPers, Mercan is not convinced that moderation and a good defense are the party's optimum choice. He likened it to someone sentenced to death deciding to await his sentence with dignity. Once AKPers make their rounds in parliament and if, as Mercan suspects, they do not get critical mass of opposition support, might they and

Turkey be better off if, he wondered, AKP were to push forward a medium-sized packet that could then go to referendum? They certainly would win if they go to the people. This option might reduce the chance of closure, he thought. He conceded, though, that a continued crisis atmosphere, which the AKP approach seeks to avoid, could truly damage the economy.

14. (C) In a normal democracy, AKP would get its rewards or take its licks from the voters. Unfortunately, that's not the case here, he stated. AKP and Erdogan certainly have made mistakes. They should not have pushed the headscarf amendments, for example; this would have changed in its own good time. Even though they did, he knows Erdogan, and is convinced the PM honestly did not intend anything bad. People say things; sometimes things slip out that shouldn't; that doesn't equate with bad intent.

15. (C) Mercan is uncertain about the future -- not just for AKP, but for Turkey. Tayyip Erdogan, while fallible, is the sort of charismatic leader who only comes along once in a while. He has been good for Turkey; he is well-liked and well-respected in the region. When he is banned, Mercan asserted, there is no one who can step in and take his place.

Yes, AKP should groom someone within the party who could step in. The problem is, there is no logical candidate -- and it's not that "someone" left the party or was purged from the July 2007 election lists. Erdogan's qualities are hard to come by. Even were Abdullah Gul to step down from the presidency to take over, he would not have the draw of Erdogan, who can bring the masses with him.

16. (C) Where does AKP go from here? The party will hold

ANKARA 00000644 002 OF 002

together, in Mercan's view, though a handful may jump ship. The base is quite despondent right now -- an enormous opportunity has been lost. Revealing frustration that this is not an arena in which he feels there can be a fair fight, Mercan reviewed possible outcomes and came up with none he saw as positive:

--AKP is closed, a number of key politicians banned: If 5% of the seats in parliament are empty, there would have to be by-elections within three months. Even if the Court bans all the MPs on the Chief Prosecutor's wish list, more would have to resign to reach the 5% vacancy mark. Mercan was skeptical it would happen. (Others with whom we have spoken disagree, and believe AKP would create the vacancies needed to force by-elections, creating an opportunity for those banned, such as Erdogan, to run as independents.)

--The party is closed, key politicians are banned and the GOT calls early elections: The 45-60 days would be insufficient for a new party truly to get its feet on the ground organizationally, no matter its backing. AKP would have lost all funding and properties; it would be a real stretch to mount a campaign, especially with no natural leader. Even were AKP to take this route in the hope that Erdogan could campaign as an independent, then help run things from behind the scenes, Mercan foresees a problem: Once Erdogan loses his seat, his parliamentary immunity goes with it, and Mercan expects other concerted legal attacks against the PM. This would be the case whether the elections are general elections or by-elections. The merit of any such suits may be questionable, but they could knock the PM out as a political player.

17. (C) Mercan concludes Turkey is in for difficult days. Would that there were a viable opposition that could both challenge AKP and govern effectively. Right now, he sees only dark clouds with no silver linings. He sees downsides for Turkey's regional leadership: He sees no potential for a Cyprus settlement, and predicts the nationalists will refuse to give an inch on concessions necessary for a settlement. And he sees only trouble ahead domestically as the country

struggles to move forward under the current judicial yoke.

18. (C) Comment: Mercan understands the stakes. He recognizes it would be shadow boxing to try to hit the "enemy" but wonders if the party can maintain a principled stand and not start to leak members. Implicitly, Erdogan -- in an inherently undemocratic party structure typical of Turkey -- has already made the decision for AKP. He has communicated it to his closest lieutenants but not yet to the party masses. It is the PM's own future at stake, both now and if AKP is closed, the PM loses his parliamentary immunity and other judicial wolves descend. Mercan sees it as Turkey's future as well. His concerns are well-founded. End comment.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

WILSON